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Congresswoman Betty McCollum
Floor Statement on H. Res. 34
January 9, 2009

Betty McCollum
Jan 4/09

Ms. McCollum: Madam Speaker, the resolution before the House today, H. Res. 34, justifies Israel's bombardment of the citizens of Gaza, sanctions the incursion of Israeli troops into Gaza to clear this occupied territory of Hamas fighters regardless of the human cost, and calls for "supporting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process" while innocent Palestinian women and children are being killed in Gaza. This resolution strongly and justifiably condemns Hamas, but the resolution's intent and substance are void of any relation to the hellish reality that is being inflicted on the citizens of Gaza right now or the deprivation inflicted upon Gaza families by Israel's harsh denial of food, medicine and fuel over the past year.

This is only the latest battle in a long war for respect and security between Israel and the Palestinian people. Israeli citizens have suffered for years under an intermittent but terrifying rocket bombardments launched by militants in the Gaza strip. Since 2001, twenty Israelis have been killed by these rockets, hundreds injured, and the lives of many thousands more disrupted by the constant fear of random and indiscriminate violence from the sky. When this summer's tenuous cease-fire broke down, the rocket attacks increased precipitously, prompting Israel's current military operation in Gaza.

I recognize Israel's right to protect its citizens from the persistent and growing threat of rocket attacks. However, as an unwavering proponent of peace, and as an advocate for the rights and security of the Israeli and Palestinian people, I seriously question the proportionality of Israel's response and regretfully predict that Israel's military action will produce only short-term security gains while severely undermining the prospects of peace in the months and years ahead.

Despite the fact too many Israeli citizens are under great stress from Hamas rockets, these weapons do not represent an existential threat to Israel. Rather than a serious military challenge, these rockets are like a drug gang that uses drive by shootings as a tactic to terrify a neighborhood. When is the solution to this type of terror for authorities to lay waste to the neighborhood?

Recent weeks of Israeli air and ground assaults have resulted in nearly 800 deaths, half of these innocent civilians. A population of 1.5 million Gazans, already weakened by previous months of economic blockade, are suffering from a lack of food, water, electricity and essential medicine. With border crossings closed, civilians are literally caught in the crossfire between Hamas

militants and the Israeli army with no ability to escape. The difficult situation that existed in Gaza prior to Israel's attack has quickly deteriorated into a humanitarian disaster.

The world is watching as Israel's bombardment in Gaza continues to escalate. Public opinion around the world is hardening against Israel as desperate images of destruction reach the media. For example, a high-ranking Vatican official has compared the conditions in Gaza to "a big concentration camp." An Israeli official condemned the comments and chastised the Catholic leader's words as "far removed from truth and dignity." But after 13 days of warfare it is reported by officials in Gaza that more than 750 people are dead, of which 40 percent are women and children.

Last night, the United Nations Security Council voted and approved a resolution for "an immediate, durable and fully respected cease-fire" leading to a "full withdrawal" of Israeli forces from Gaza. The resolution also called for humanitarian aid to pass into Gaza and an end to trafficking of weapons into the occupied territory. The United States, represented by Secretary of State Rice, did not join the fourteen other nations approving the measure, our government abstained.

The Bush administration has failed to successfully work for an immediate cease-fire. And this resolution fails to call for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza. What this resolution does do is allow Israel to continue its efforts to eliminate the threat of Hamas, which will only lead to further civilian deaths. With nearly 800 Gazans already dead and Israel's international image equally bloodied, there is no victory left for either side to achieve, the present battle has become a competition for biggest loser.

An immediate ceasefire is the only option. The current fighting must end before the foundations of the peace process are undermined any further and the prospects of a two state solution are dealt a final blow. The United States government must recapture its role as an honest broker in the Israel-Palestinian conflict and urgently commit its full energy and resources to achieving a ceasefire and sustaining its engagement to ensure the causes of the present violence – arms smuggling, rocket fire, economic blockade – are resolved.

The continued isolation of Gaza is an unacceptable option in light of the depravation and increasing desperation of the mothers, fathers and children of Gaza. If the humanitarian needs in Gaza are not quickly and comprehensively addressed, the world faces the prospect of a radicalized generation of Palestinian youth – over 56 percent Gazans are under the age of 16. America should lead an international effort, initiated immediately after declaration of a ceasefire, to heal and rebuild Gaza. The memory of the present conflict cannot be erased from the minds and hearts of Palestinian youth, but we can ensure those memories include a generous and meaningful response from the world.

The goal of the United States, and the world, must be to work for peace. And the path to peace will never be forged through violence.

For these reasons, it is my intention to vote present on H. Res. 34.